

Fire Sprinkler Testimony

Quadrant Homes

Testimony Before the Washington State Building Code Council

In Support of Voluntary Residential Fire Sprinklers

September 29, 2009

By: Mark Gray, Executive Vice President, Homebuilding

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Council today. On behalf of Quadrant Homes, I urge the Council to retain the option for voluntary -- not mandatory -- residential fire sprinklers in Washington state.

For those who may not be familiar with our company, Quadrant Homes is a builder and developer of new single family communities in Western Washington. For 40 years, Quadrant Homes has sought to provide safe housing, especially to the first-time homebuyer. Of course, affordability is always uppermost in our minds whenever we are called upon to advocate about public policy issues that affect our homebuyers. The per house cost associated with mandating sprinklers does concern us, but today I wish to speak about two other critical issues – encouraging cost-effective, proven fire safety, and advocating for homebuyer choice.

The sentiments expressed by many in the fire protection community are heartfelt and we share in the intention to help save lives. If sprinklers are required in new residential homes, the gripping stories we have heard will still be told, as new homes only make a fraction of a percent of the total stock of shelter units. Children and adults will still suffer injury and death from burns and toxic fumes in the home. If sprinklers are required in new residential homes, the increased cost will slow the rate at which new homes are built and the rate they replace existing units, which currently have less fire protection measures included than new home construction.

Preventing death or injury from fire is an issue the homebuilding industry takes seriously. As a result, fire protection is now built into the very fabric of the communities we create. The fire protection measures, taken now, is not just a long list, but also includes highly effective actions that have dramatically reduced death and injuries from fire in new home construction. These currently-used preventive actions for new home construction are proven: fire deaths in residences have steadily fallen in the last 30 years.

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Washington code has effectively and dramatically improved fire protection in new residential construction and, after implementing ever-stricter codes, the tipping point has been reached. It should remain a personal choice for homebuyers to decide if the extra margin of safety is worth the cost to install fire sprinklers in single family homes.

In these challenging times for the homebuilding industry, it is tempting to argue against sprinklers because it is poor timing, given the current economic environment. But mandatory fire sprinklers are a poor allocation of financial resources and it is never a good time to adopt poor public policy like this.

That is why we believe it is so very essential to make sure that scarce available resources be used in the best, most effective ways that are proven to save lives. Washingtonians aren't the first to consider imposing mandatory fire sprinklers. Other states and other countries, too, have carefully considered its benefits and costs. Clearly, many more lives can be saved by continuing to voluntarily investing our capital in procuring and maintaining smoke detectors, using individual fire safety plans, including installing escape ladders, or placing fire extinguishers in all homes.

We believe homebuyers should be able to continue to make their own choices about the potential benefit of installing a residential fire sprinkler system. Some will and have chosen to do so. For others, the additional cost of a fire sprinkler system may put homeownership out of reach. We think it is better to allow homebuyers to weigh the value of investing in a fire sprinkler system against other, equally important, quality of life or risk management actions.

Before I conclude, I would urge you to further assess the information cited by the Camas Fire official about the features and benefits offered builders and developers when entitling their land. I am not aware of any such case of securing permission to build of sprinklers are installed.

In conclusion, we support continuation of the cost-effective and proven fire protection measures that are currently in code. And we also support allowing homeowners to continue to choose if they wish to make additional, enhanced investments for fire sprinklers. We urge the Council to retain voluntary residential sprinklers.

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